

William Rembt #96
July 16, 1985

Q: Mr. Rembt, why don't you tell me when you first joined the Army?

A: I believe it was 1939. I was working for Texas Oil Company and beside I had a good friend of mine was stationed in Mitchell Field, and one night we were over having a few beers and stopped by the breeze(??) and he says, "Why don't you join the Service and be a bombardier." You know, I was interested in it and I was willing. He said, "You know you could join up and you can go to school later on and all that you know." And I said, "Oh, alright." and went down there.

A couple of weeks later I went down to New York, Whitehall Street, I guess it was, and signed up. I signed up to go to Philippines and well.... from there we went up to Ft. Slocum, to Brooklyn Army Base, then took the Republic down through Panama, and Panama up to Frisco, and Frisco over to Honolulu.

Honolulu, they had something up in the mountains and they needed bulldozer operators and anything. So it didn't make any difference if you were in the Air Force or anything else, the 6² footers and over went to the MP's and the others went wherever they wanted to put you. So I never did get to the [Army] Air [Corps] in the Philippines.

So about six months later when I was up at Schofield they sent me down and got transferred to Hickam and that's where my career started in the [Army] Air [Corps].

Q: What were you doing there at Hickam?

A: Mechanic. Then we had B-18's. That was all we had then.

Q: What sort of an airplane was the B-18?

A: Twin engine bomber and I don't remember how many crew... a bombardier, navigator, pilot, co-pilot, engineer, and maybe one gunner.

Q: Was it a good airplane?

A: Yeah, one of the best. I thought it was. I believe it was built by Douglas. It was a good aircraft and for why it was made for at that time. And later on we got the old, well it was new then, B-17's. But they no ball turrets on them and no tail gunners on them. We had those.

Then when December 7th came along, they had all the pyrotechnics, like in the radio compartment, around the walls and all that. And I think that's why half of them burned because they just burned right in half as soon as them pyrotechnics went up, that was the end of the airplane.

Q: What were the pyrotechnics?

A: The flares and all that stuff. And I noticed myself that most of them were right there in that particular part when you know, as soon as that got burning, that's it; burn right through concrete and anything.

So then, I guess December 7th, the morning of it, I was going to town with another fellow. We were gonna... I don't know what we were gonna do but I had a date that afternoon. So we (something??) on our cars and went back and got cleaned up and was gonna go to town. And about that time all hell broke loose.

So I was in the barracks and this other friend of mine, he was in the barracks, George Holtz I think his name was. So we didn't know what to do. So he went across the street behind the mess hall or the kitchen, and they were building a new building there, and there was a big hole. So we decided we'd dive in there for awhile.

And George says, "Well, there's nothing we can do here. Maybe we can get back in the barracks, after the first raid, and if anybody's hurt, we can at least carry them out you know? Try that." So we went in the barracks and there was nobody in there that we knew and nobody was hurt. We didn't see anybody.

So then the second raid started and we went outside and we hid next to the building, which was rather stupid. And I forgot who it was... one of the officers came by and seeing about six or seven of us in there, he says, "Come on. We'll go down to the flight line and see what we can salvage." So we went down there and had to break in the, whaddaya call it, the tool room... not tool room but supplies and stuff and they had a tow bar in there. We got that out and towed a couple of B-17's off the jacks, pulled them out you know, tried to save them. And they were doing a modification on the fuel tanks at that time. They had rubber tanks in there and they were really.... a lot of problems with them. And we got out and George was... I said, "You ride the brakes and I'll pull it." and we went out across the field. So we unhooked it and I went, "Alright George, give me a tug and let's get out of here." Anyway he was already gone... (laughter)

Then we was laying in the bushes and about that time the B-17's came in from the States, and one landed and he ground loped and went into the tall grass there and stuff like that. And a fellow made one remark that, "Gee, you guys really have rough maneuvers over here." (laughter) and we said, "Well this is not a maneuver. We don't think it is anyway. It's causing a lot of damage."

And then all we... that night or that afternoon, after it was all over and people began, and I was never scared until it was all over and you had a chance to think about it, and you think about some of the dopey things you did you know. And it was all over.

Then they finally, the airplanes we could, we worked on them, got them back, B-18's especially, get them in commission. Used them for patrol; that was about all. They had a few bombs they could carry I guess and that was that. And then I think we had one over in Hilo, on the Big Island, he was home for the weekend, and then he came in that night, and we got him all serviced and ready to go; guns on it and everything else.

The next day or a couple of days later, we didn't have nothing left of our squadron, the 26th [Bombardment] Squadron was fairly wiped out. So they broke us up. Some went to the 42nd [Bombardment Squadron];

some went to the 50th [Reconnaissance Squadron] I guess, and different places.

And our CO, he was back in the States that time picking up new B-17's; him and several of the crew you know. And when he came back our CO was Major Cobb (great guy) and he came back and he had no more squadron. Boy he must have raised heck, because he got a hold of Saunders, old blondy Saunders, he was the group CO and he says, "I want my Squadron back." and he got a couple of trucks and he rode over to Bellows Field and looked at Wheeler Field and no matter what you were doing, "Get your tool box, or get this, and get in the truck, and get your gear. We're going back to Hickam."

From there we stayed at Hickam and we formed, you know, got the Squadron back in shape and went near up to Wheeler. We stayed up in Wheeler; from Wheeler we went back to Hickam I believe. Then we went to Midway. Then I was on a crew, Capt. Kinney(?) was our pilot, Kimmy Gates(?) the navigator... uh Bombardier; Charlie Ward, Grieve, radio operators, uh, I can't think of the names of a lot of them anymore.

And then we went to Midway; we were in the battle of Midway.

Q: What did you folks do in the battle of Midway?

A: We were at patrol; bombing patrol. And came back from Midway... well, we stayed in Midway for three or four days. Our photographer, believe it or not, on the plane was Ford, the movie producer.

Q: Oh, John Ford?

A: Yeah. And every time we were in the foxhole they'd come over or something like that, he'd say, "Get up there and take a picture of it." He'd stay down and we'd kid him you know. (laughter)

And then we went from Midway, we came back and we had trouble with two engines so we landed on, I believe it was right here on this Island.

Q: On Maui?

A: Yeah, but there was nothing here then. I mean there was just like a small base you know. The town, I didn't even know there was a town. So then we got it fixed up and we flew back to Hickam. Then from Hickam we stayed there on patrol. We got patrols almost every day. Then from there we went to... we left there to go down to the Solomons. Well, we went to New Hebrides first, went to Christmas Island (I forgot what the other one was), and then into New Hebrides that Espiritu Santos. Then we flew out of there on our missions and raids, and from there we went down to the Canal; flew some more out of there, and then it was time to come home.

Q: Sounds interesting. When uh... on December 7th when you were back at Hickam, what was the first thing that you noticed that led you to believe that something out of the ordinary was happening?

A: Well, where the parking lot was, you could look over to Pearl Harbor and you could see the smoke billowing from the ships, the

buildings, and stuff like that. And definitely you know, that was no maneuvers. Well, see, Sunday morning, always on Sundays, they had about the ships coming in to Pearl Harbor. They never wanted so many in at one time on account of all the sailors in town and everything else. So they tried to battleships would come in one time and then maybe they would go back out and a carrier would come in or something. Carriers used to always fly their planes in before; maybe day before. And everybody, when you first looked up you figured hey Jeez them the guys from the carrier coming in for the weekend you know, or the week day stay or whatever it is. That's what we all thought they were. So we seen the smoke arisin'. Then we realized you know, what was going on. We were all scared to hell for awhile then you know, you did so much, you don't realize that it was all over you know?

Q: Did you see the hangars and the planes...

A: Oh yeah, as a matter of fact, we went right down to the hangar when this... I forgot who he... he was a Lt. then who he was. But he said, "Let's get down there and see what we can salvage and see if anybody's hurt and all that." And the only person I seen get killed, he didn't get killed, I think he died of concussion. We were standing between two walls and I guess the concussion got him. But uh, we seen everything burn and that was it you know. We knew then.

Then the second raid came and the only thing you could do was just hide and that's what we did. We had no guns, no ammunition, or nothing. Then we finally got some you know; then finally got some old pistols from WWI, I think... old Colt 45's. Then cleaned them up and use them. That was the last of the...

Next day, as I say, we got all the aircraft together and what we could and salvaged, and made a squadron out of them I guess. But most all the old B-17's, they were gone, because they burned like I said you know, from the incendiaries. I mean you couldn't help missing. I mean I think a blind man could have shot them down. I mean they were all lined up just as pretty as could be.

Q: O.K., one thing I wanted to ask you... What's the single most vivid memory you got in your mind from that day?

A: I don't know. Just maybe, we were in this hole where they were digging some sewer pipes or water pipes (I don't know what it was) and like this fellow, black friend of mine says, "Let's see what we can do." and we ran in the barracks and there was nobody there. We didn't believe it you know, the way they were hitting and bombing everything. We figured there'd be people wounded all over the place and knock wood or something like that, they were... nobody was in there.

And then the next thing, going right on down the line, the firehouse was right on the corner from where our barracks was.

Q: Oh yeah?

A: Yeah, and that was on fire. So, that was it.

Q: O.K., well, I thank you for your time...

A: Your welcome.

Q: ...and for coming by.